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The young and restless: Re-examining media portrayals of youth

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"THE YOUNG AND RESTLESS"

Re-examining Media Portrayals of Youth

By Shee Siew Ying

What first comes to mind when someone mentions "young people" or "youth", and how much of your impression is determined by the last news article you read? If you are wont to use "reckless", "troublemakers", "self-absorbed", "obsessed with social media" or "lacking in self-control" in the same sentence as "youth", this could be the doing of the traditional mass media, whose reportage on this demographic consistently overstates an involvement in risky behaviours.

In his 1998 seminal work, *Moral Panics*, social scientist Kenneth Thompson claimed, "No age group is more associated with risk in the public imagination than that of youth."[1] Now, decades after this claim was made, it appears that little has changed. A simple Google search on "Youth in Singapore" yields reports pertaining to teen violence and misadventures on dating sites;[2] in the United States, youth make the most headlines for school shootings;[3] and in 2008 alone, more than half of the UK's national and regional newspapers' coverage of teenagers had to do with crime.[4]

IT'S ALL RELATIVE

From TV programmes, to newspapers, books and magazines, traditional media's depictions of youth have tended to dwell on either sides of two extremes: hapless victims or violent perpetrators. In Stanley Cohen's 1972 work, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*,[5] he describes how these dismissive media portrayals of youth have fixed the public's general perceptions of them in a particular way that has had lasting and far-reaching effects.

In recent years, a number of youth victimisation cases have also dominated Singapore's news, involving cases of "none-the-wiser" teens being duped by cyber scams, and suffering sexual or financial exploitation as a result.[6] Attempting to explain this trend, social

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workers attributed youth's "often naïve, trusting" nature to their "especially vulnerable" position in society.[7] Ironically, when not suggesting more should be done for these helpless youngsters, there are just as many news stories and national statistics on youth crime, delinquency and drug abuse, which present a darker side to this group.[8]

As worrying as the "phenomenon" of youth violence and arrests may seem at first glance, the numbers, when presented in relative terms as a proportion of all youth in Singapore, paints a more optimistic picture. In 2016, only 0.5 per cent of all youth in Singapore were arrested for youth crime,[9] which means that the overwhelming majority (99.5 per cent) were engaged in other, presumably non-law-breaking, activities. Singaporean parents may also be glad to know that the vast majority of the nation's youth are not "troubled"—in fact, with 74 per cent regarding "maintaining family ties" as a very important life goal,[10] they are quite "homey"!

"Lego Love" by Eva Peris, via Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0).

WHAT'S AGE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

While society may have been quick to establish a direct link between age and delinquency, it is also worthwhile to examine the wider issues behind youth's particular "susceptibility" to "acting out". This point is supported by Mr Ho Peng Kee, formerly the Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs and Chairman of the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime, who emphasised that "no single factor explains why youths turn to crime".[14]

One view argues that, among affected children, parental divorce causes family instability and triggers "psychological problems such as separation anxiety, grief and lower self-esteem,"[15] thus leading them to seek solace in "risky behaviours". Yet, on the other hand, statistics reveal that troubled youth do not all originate from single-parent families:[16] a study examining the family structures of young offenders arrested in Singapore between 2013 and 2014 showed that only 53 per cent[17] came from families with separated or divorced parents. This is substantiated by Gus Martin's point that it is the discord in a household, rather than family make-up, that can prove "much more disruptive" to a child.[18]

Besides family instability, the pressures of school and grades have also been identified as a major source of unhappiness for Singaporean youth aged between 15 and 18.[19] This corresponds with the findings in a 2004 national report on marriage and parenthood,[20] which highlighted how high parental expectations towards children's academic performance contributed significantly to the latter's stress levels.

In light of the above, I suggest that it is youth's sense of *disengagement*—rather than age—that predisposes them to "risky behaviours" (online and off), but this is a separate topic that deserves closer examination, and the scope of it will not be covered in this article.

MINORITY REPORT

According to Philip Graham's classifications of individuals, the youth population of most developed nations can be parked under the "problematic minority" group[21]—this applies to Singapore as well, whose 3,000-something "troubled" youth constitute a mere 0.5 per cent of its whole youth demographic. Considering its "minority" standing, the disproportionate amount of attention that traditional media pays to it is puzzling. It is plain to see that other groups (the elderly, children or adults) are not as closely associated with risk, crime and violence, and this leads one to wonder if a particularly ageist attitude against youth might be behind this obvious media slant. First coined by Robert Neil Butler in 1969 to describe discrimination against seniors,[22] the term "ageism" has since expanded to encompass general age-related bias, stereotyping and unfair practices against individuals based solely on their age. Similarly, the traditional media's tendency to portray young people as synonymous with traits such as powerlessness and vulnerability, as well as lacking in knowledge, experience and the capacity to resist temptation, is suggestive of an "ageist" stance.

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Traditional media's negative typecasting of young people influences not only public perception, but has an impact on youth's self-image as well. Research shows that such age-based stereotypes lead some youngsters to believe they are of lower status, have fewer rights, and cause them to feel less motivated to speak out in general.[23] In many countries, youth are seldom given the opportunity to contribute to decisions about public policies (e.g. national budget and urban planning), although Boston has proven a positive exception (see boxed story: "Boston: Doing Right by Youth").

BRAND NEW YOUTH

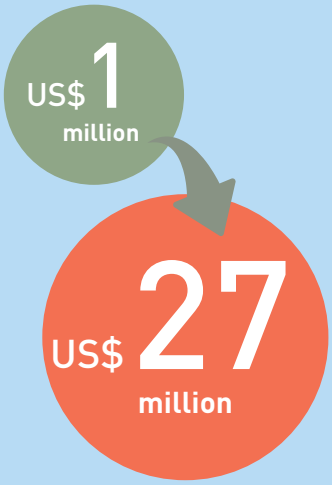
While an image overhaul of youth is long overdue in traditional media, one need not hold his breath. With the emerging generation of millennials eschewing printed newspapers and magazines and turning instead to online news sites, blogs and social media for information and entertainment, the Internet and new media are giving traditional media a run for its money—as well as providing youth an alternative platform to be seen and heard. And with that, a different picture of youth is emerging.

Founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates, was a teenager when he discovered his forte in programming and wrote his first tic-tac-toe computer programme. That was several decades ago, when such remarkable cases were few and far between. However, today's youth-led entrepreneurship scene is thriving by leaps and bounds: unlike before, when founding a start-up straight after graduation seemed like a foolishly risky endeavour, it is today viewed as something commendable—even viable. To meet young people's growing interest in entrepreneurship as a career, more specialised courses are being taught by business schools and educational institutions.[24]

Today, armed with suitable knowledge and by being at the right place (read: online platform) at the right

BOSTON: DOING RIGHT BY YOUTH

In Boston, Massachusetts, not only are its residents invited to participate in the city's budget planning, those aged 12 to 25 in particular are targeted by the Mayor to come up with budgeting projects. Known as "Youth Lead the Change", it is America's first youth-driven city budgeting programme that works with youth to understand their needs, in order to ultimately create an inclusive city.



Started in 2009 with US$1 million by the Mayor and his Youth Council, participatory budgeting for youth in Boston has presently expanded to US$27 million. Under this programme, high school juniors and seniors serve as volunteer representatives of every neighbourhood in the city. Forums are held regularly for young people to contribute ideas and solutions directly to the Mayor and other city officials, after which these are narrowed down to four initiatives that focus on improving Boston's safety, environment and health, community and culture, and education. Following that, city residents vote for the top proposals, which go on to receive funding. Some of 2016's winning project ideas by Bostonian youth include: playground renovations, art walls, park security cameras and new sidewalks.

Throughout this year-long experience, not only do Boston's youth become more informed about the inner workings of government, they gain the soft skills required to make thoughtful decisions within a limited time and budget. With them feeling like they have a stake in the planning of their living space, young Bostonians are all the more empowered to create positive impacts on their city's design and liveability.

time, youth can meaningfully showcase their talents to an intended audience. As a case in point, after the Fiverr page (an online marketplace for digital services) of 15-year-old Singaporean student Hrithie Menon caught the attention of a Donald Trump staffer, Menon scored a gig to make a Prezi slideshow video for Trump's campaign effort at college campuses.[25] This Prezi went on to reach millions of students across US universities and high schools, and Menon's public profile has since enjoyed a considerable boost: she is presently listed as a "Top Choice Level 1 Seller" on Fiverr.

Alongside IT-savviness and a keen entrepreneurial spirit, there is yet another positive trait often attributed to today's youth: their social consciousness and desire to contribute towards positive social change.[26] A 2016 survey showed that young people are increasingly eschewing luxury holidays for immersion-type trips in emerging countries like Myanmar to experience the cultures and living conditions of local communities; and many develop empathy in the process.[27] In David Pong's travels to Phnom Penh and Bintan, the 26-year-old Singaporean was shocked to witness the stunted growth of the local children as a result of improper nutrition and lack of clean drinking water. Recognising that "water affects everything in life", he and his university mates set out to address water insecurity in such places by developing affordable and portable water filtration devices to improve the people's accessibility to clean water.[28]

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Back home, it appears that the younger generation is just as acutely aware of prevailing social issues. Desiree Yang, a 23-year-old Singapore Management University undergraduate, became aware of low-income families' inaccessibility to fresh food and dry rations during her internship at Beyond Social Services. Feeling for their plight, she and her father Mr Roland Yeo, 55, set up Singapore's first social supermarket. Named Saltsteps,[29] it sells goods and groceries rejected by regular supermarkets (for reasons such as mislabelling and torn labels) at significantly more affordable prices to low-income families, while reducing food wastage at the same time.

Examples like these, set against the rapid rise of youth-led social enterprises around the world,[30] suggest that youth may indeed have found a way to satisfy their dual passions for entrepreneurship and social change.

CONCLUSION

While it is not the intention of this article to downplay the severity of youth-related crime, I hope to have encouraged readers to put aside preconceived notions about young people (vis-à-vis the traditional media) and to make up their own minds about them based on youth's continuous strides towards meaningful change in an increasingly globalised and interconnected world.

Going forward, I hope both traditional and new media will cultivate a more inclusive environment for youth to express their ideas and opinions, especially in such areas as public policy. In Singapore, it is heartening to see the government placing a new emphasis on listening to young people's feedback—as evidenced by the rising number of youth-centred dialogues and conversations in recent years[31] —and to witness the growth of youth-led start-ups that have been incubated through initiatives such as the National University of Singapore's Overseas Colleges and SMU's Ashoka Changemaker Campus.

No longer passive subjects of the traditional press, but active authors of the new media, today's youth will soon be known for much more than what their historically negative stereotypes stood for.

YOUTH: DOING THE MATH

The United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture refers to youth as young people of both sexes between the ages of 15 and 24, although UNESCO accepts the 15–35 age bracket as defined by the African Youth Charter.[32] This category of young people also dovetails with the group known as "millennials" or "Generation Y" (those born between 1980 and 2000). In Singapore, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth defines youth as persons aged between 15 and 35 years,[33] while the Singapore Police Force places them between the ages of 7 and 19. Its definition is also culturally specific: certain individuals considered to be "youth" in one country or agency may be legally recognised as adults or children in another.

GENERATIONS X,Y & Z

Other than age brackets, the letters X, Y and Z are also used to differentiate youth according to different time periods (or "generations"). Demographers William Strauss and Neil Howe believe that each generation—owing to their shared experiences of major events—has common characteristics that give it a specific character.

Gen X (b. 1960s–early 1980s)
The culture and upbringing of Gen X'ers were shaped by global political events such as the Vietnam War, global sexual revolution of the 1960s–80s, fall of the Berlin Wall, end of the Cold War, and the Thatcher-era government. Compared to the previous baby-boomer generation, Gen X is more open to diversity and embracing of differences in religion, sexual orientation, class, race and ethnicity. Gen X'ers are also known as the "latchkey generation" (growing up with a lack of adult supervision due to having two working parents). Some famous Gen X'ers include Barack Obama, Victoria Beckham, Ben Stiller, Robert Downey Jr., Robbie Williams and Gordon Ramsay.

Gen Y a.k.a. Millennials (b. 1980s–2000)
Gen Y'ers are largely impacted by the technological revolution occurring since their childhood and teenage years. Numbering around 80 million,[34] they are the largest age-specific demographic in American history.

Due to the rapid globalisation of this period, Gen Y'ers are more exposed to Western culture than their predecessors. They are unfortunately associated with traits such as self-centredness, a sense of entitlement and narcissism.[35] Some famous Gen Y'ers include Britney Spears, Mark Zuckerberg, Taylor Swift, Emma Watson, Justin Timberlake and Beyoncé.

Gen Z (b. mid-1990s–present)
There is the least information available about this group because Gen Z'ers are still in their teenage years at this present time. Also known as the iGeneration (in reference to their IT savviness and ownership of iPhones), they have been exposed to an unprecedented amount of technology since birth—and are understandably adept in the latest digital trends and use of social media. Gen Z'ers are further known for their resourcefulness on the Internet: they self-educate with YouTube tutorials and seek inspiration from sites like Pinterest. Some famous Gen Z'ers include Malia Obama, Willow Smith, Maisie Williams, Zendaya and Maddox Jolie-Pitt.

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